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Rowanna L. Carpenter
Portland State University

Seanna M. Kerrigan
Portland State University, kerrigs@pdx.edu

Vicki Reitenauer
Portland State University, vicr@pdx.edu

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Capstone Assessment as Faculty Development

Rowanna Carpenter, Seanna Kerrigan and Vicki L. Reitenauer

Portland State University (PSU) is a public institution in Portland, Oregon, serving 28,000 students, including 23,000 undergraduates. PSU implemented Capstone courses in 1995 as the culminating experience in the revised general education program, University Studies (UNST). Capstones at PSU are community-based courses comprised of interdisciplinary teams of students actively engaged with community partners, designed to address the UNST learning goals (inquiry and critical thinking; communication; ethics and social responsibility; and diversity, equity, and social justice). Each Capstone course creates one or more collaboratively developed final products intended to serve the community partner.

In this article, we describe the evolution of our Capstone assessment practice and highlight the current process we designed to assess these courses. Through this process--which is the latest and most successful iteration of an assessment protocol for these highly contextual courses--we recognized that conceptualizing an assessment process as simultaneously a forum for peer-driven faculty support increases faculty ownership over assessment and investment in using assessment results to make change in their own courses.

The Evolution of Capstone Assessment

Since the late 1990s, the Capstone program has followed established assessment processes, including student focus groups and quantitative and qualitative survey data that informed a robust faculty development program. While these practices served the program well, this assessment plan was missing the examination of direct evidence of student learning through work sample analysis. One early approach to Capstone assessment involved having Capstone instructors assign a common reflective prompt and reviewing them using the UNST rubrics originally designed to assess first-year student portfolios. That review revealed that the rubric developed for first-year portfolios containing traditional academic work, while sufficiently robust in identifying the full range of development relative to the learning outcome in question, did not align well with expectations for students in community-based Capstones. Further, faculty reported difficulty with the common assignment, finding it inauthentic in the context of their courses, given differences across courses relative to community partners, course themes, and final products.

In 2005, in an effort to analyze direct evidence of student learning in Capstones, UNST began collecting representative student work samples. Each year, a different approach was taken, and each year the process was improved. First, a sample of student reflective writing was collected across multiple Capstones and reviewed for emergent themes. That review revealed

that students could report their learning related to UNST goals, but the actual evidence of learning was in interactions with community members or presentations to external audiences, encounters which were not captured in the reflective assignment. In fact, in end-of-term evaluations, more than 80% of students regularly report that they had experienced learning around the goals, but reviewers were unable to perceive how that learning had happened from student work samples. Also missing was the course context, namely a description of the community partnership and the work the student was doing, which would help reviewers understand students' learning experiences and whether they had met the program's learning goals.

The next attempt to examine work samples involved a review of Capstone final products (such as grants, curricula, research reports, and websites). This review revealed that the final products were all related to at least one learning outcome for the course, but, because they were intended for a specific purpose with a specific community-based audience, the group-produced products were not good places to find evidence of individual student learning. Final products demonstrated that groups of students could produce meaningful and useful products for community partners, but did not reveal information about individual student learning.

Faculty reviewers suggested that assessing individual student work would be more meaningful if they had more contextual information. They wanted to know how the course was designed to meet the learning goals, what the community partnership entailed, and how that partnership contributed to the goals, along with direct evidence of student work through assignments. In the next assessment cycle, then, faculty were required to submit a 3-5 page reflection providing that context, which was turned into an ePortfolio alongside student work samples and other artifacts of the course and reviewed by a small team of faculty and administrators.

Improving on Success

The eePortfolio assessment process was successful in a number of ways, offering a richer and more robust understanding of courses and student learning in those courses. However, the model we had developed, in which individual faculty submit materials in the absence of interaction around the purpose and results, began to feel as though it was missing something. We realized we were not taking advantage of an opportunity for collaboration and peer feedback among the faculty who submitted portfolios in a given year.

Now we approach Capstone course ePortfolio assessment as a faculty development opportunity. Instead of requiring a written narrative statement, faculty present their courses to each other. Faculty meet twice as part of this process. First, we hold an introductory meeting during which we explain the purpose of the ePortfolio assessment process, and we invite faculty

to describe their courses to each other and share the assignment they intend to submit related to the learning goal of the year. Faculty hear about the range of courses and community partnerships in the program, share successes and challenges around teaching to particular goals, and offer and receive feedback to and from their colleagues about the assignment they are including in both the course and in the course ePortfolio.

At the end of the term, faculty submit the materials--the course syllabus, the assignment guidelines, student work samples from the assignment, and any related material they may choose --that comprise their course ePortfolios. These are contained in an in-house website which is password-protected so that student work is not available to the public.

After the academic year is complete, we gather with all available faculty who have participated in the process to review the ePortfolios. Each year, we've had about 75% of faculty attend this session. During this session, we re-introduce ourselves and orient to the day and our two tasks: review of course ePortfolios and feedback to colleagues. We review an ePortfolio together and practice applying the rubric. Then facilitators break the faculty into small groups of three or four. Before we review portfolios, faculty introduce their courses to each other and describe the context for the assignment they have submitted. We then review course ePortfolios using the rubric, and we complete a short-answer comment sheet which frames feedback to the faculty.

Each course ePortfolio is read by two or three people, including at least one person from within the faculty member's small group and one person who is not in the group, to ensure that we are not getting positive comments simply because the person had just interacted with the subject of the review. Rubric scores are submitted to the program and are not revealed to the faculty until after the review day. At the end of the day, we gather again in small groups. Each person hears from their colleagues what was observed about their course. Faculty receive feedback on where the goal was particularly evident in the course ePortfolio and opportunities readers saw to strengthen the goal further. Faculty are encouraged to ask additional questions for specific feedback from their colleague-reviewers.

After conducting this process for a pilot year and three subsequent years, we are pleased that we have landed on an approach that offers faculty a meaningful opportunity to provide both peer-to-peer recognition of their accomplishments as instructors and grounded, relational suggestions for improvement based in that recognition. The process by which faculty collaborate with each other to offer and receive feedback on multiple course elements--syllabi, assignments, class activities, and so on--provides the foundation for a deeper and more nuanced review than simply applying a quantitative score to a portfolio. In evaluations of the review process that faculty complete at the end of the day, they overwhelmingly express the value of the process and often note in concrete and explicit terms the takeaways they plan to adopt in their courses. They

note that these takeaways result from both their own review of others' ePortfolios and from the feedback they received on theirs. We followed up with faculty to determine whether they had actually changed anything based on this experience and discovered that they had made significant improvements to their courses--as well as strengthened collegial relationships that we believe will allow faculty to deepen their sense of belonging in the program and with each other, in alignment with the relational philosophy with which we approach faculty development throughout UNST.

In addition to serving as an effective way to measure student learning in specific goal areas, faculty report that this process helps them reflect on and improve their teaching as they gain new insights about student learning, something emphasized by many advocates of course portfolios (Hutchings 1998; Cerbin 1994). Faculty report greater intentionality in the design of their assignments and syllabi in response to this process. Faculty and administrators agree that it has been effective to gather and showcase best assignments from a variety of faculty across many disciplines who don't typically witness each other's work. It aids in sharing information across the University's silos, which is deeply important in general, and is particularly meaningful in an interdisciplinary general education program like University Studies.

Elements of Success

A number of factors contribute to the success of this assessment practice in UNST. In particular, we have maintained a focus on improvement, addressed program and faculty needs, and involved faculty in the processes which create the conditions under which they teach and students learn.

The current assessment approach built on previous faculty-led assessment efforts. As shown above, there were a number of earlier attempts to assess direct evidence of student learning in Capstones before we arrived at the current process. Those efforts were informative but lacked the comprehensive nature of our current assessment. When the current system was proposed, it was designed to address the challenges identified in previous efforts and was considered the next experiment. Given UNST's history of experimentation with assessment approaches, this meant it was not set up as a high-stakes endeavor with strong pressure for "success," but rather the newest iteration of an assessment process that will, undoubtedly, evolve over time.

In addition to addressing the needs discovered through previous processes, the course ePortfolio approach also addressed faculty concerns. Capstone faculty had expressed frustration with assessment processes that did not capture the richness of the community-based learning experiences occurring in their courses. While there is no method that truly captures the transformative learning that happens in Capstones, the ePortfolio approach honors the

complexity of these courses and allows for both faculty and student voices to be present in the analysis.

Finally, and importantly, University Studies is committed to using information about student learning outcomes to improve Capstone courses taught throughout the entire University. Quality improvement has been a central commitment of Capstone assessment since the inception of this program, and we believe that living out that commitment is the primary reason we have had the support of our faculty to implement our assessment processes. Faculty knew that every piece of data collected would actually be analyzed, reported back to them, and used as the basis for improvement. This focus on improvement allowed us to avoid some of the resistance that Kramer (2009) and Norton (2006) identify with assessment, when it is used for accountability measures only.

Conclusion

Each year Portland State is acknowledged by *U.S. News and World Report* as a national exemplar in providing high-quality Capstone courses. The University views this accolade as a responsibility to continuously improve our program in order to serve as a model of excellence. In University Studies, we recognize that improvement will only come with strong faculty involvement and support.

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